

A Small Change of Plans

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Disclaimer: Star Wars and all things Star Warish belong to George Lucas and Lucasfilm. I'm not making money off this, I'm just having fun...even though I suspect that deep in his plaid soul, George would be horrified.

Warning: This is slash. No sex, but the situation is still slash. If your emotionally fragile soul can't handle that, then make like a preacher and get the hell out of here.

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> by Varghona<p>

_ "Good luck, Luke! See you at the rendezvous!" --Wedge Antilles,
_TESB

I had my arm draped around Leia when Wedge stormed into the medical suite. He'd probably only just gotten off patrol; he hadn't changed out of his flight suit yet, and his helmet was tucked under one arm. I smiled automatically, glad to see him (and, I admit, thinking about all those sympathy points my story would get, and how pleasantly inventive Wedge could be at making me feel better); but one look at him and I could tell something was wrong.

Leia favored him with a brilliant smile. "Wedge." She didn't know him as well as I did, and she probably didn't recognize the warning signs. To me, his mussed hair, rigid shoulders, and brisk, clipped movements were blatant storm front indicators, like a black cloud in a blue sky.

"Princess." He nodded politely. "It's good to have you back." Pause.

A sidelong look at me. "Good to have both of you back."

I'm in trouble. Forget that sympathetic shoulder and those comforting arms. Well, I had nothing to be ashamed of. Holding Leia was meant to be a friendly gesture, nothing more. Wedge had never gone jealous on me before, and he was picking a really bad time to start.

"It's good to _be_ back," I said quietly. That seemed like the safest thing to say. Something a little more truthful would have been, _It's good to be alive even though the most loathsome man in the galaxy has tortured your friends and chopped off your hand and informed you that he's your long-lost father, blowing everything you ever believed or trusted into spacedust, and then just for fun he put one of your best friends into carbon freeze and now the woman you secretly adore is all torn up over it, yes, it's good to be alive in spite of these minor discomforts, how the hell was your day?_

"I'm sorry about Han," he said. This was to Leia.

She accepted it with a silent nod, and I felt a twinge of pain like a metal band tightening across my chest. Leia's pain, I realized. And mine--guilt. My friends had suffered because of me.

Theoretically, Wedge wasn't supposed to know about Han's capture. The Alliance would want to keep this business under wraps, but I knew that as soon as the _Falcon_ returned to the Fleet minus Han Solo, the rumor mills must've kicked into hyperdrive.

"Blackie told me about it," he explained. Blackie was his astromech. "Artoo filled him in."

Uh oh. When it comes to gossip, astromech droids are worse than a clutch of old women at market. Information is part of their job, and what one astromech shares with another astromech can quickly become what an astromech shares with its pilot on the heads-up display of an X-wing.

"Artoo talks too much," I groused.

He gave me another sidelong look before turning back to Leia. "Believe me, if there's anything I can do, let me know. I mean it."

"I know you do." Leia managed a smile. "Congratulations on your promotion. I've been meaning to say..."

Wedge smiled tightly and glanced down at his new rank insignia. A captain, I noticed with a swell of pride. Pride was quickly followed by guilt: I should've been the one to notice, and remark on it.

"Well done," I said softly, meaning it.

He finally met my eyes. "Thanks." His voice was equally soft, like the soft hum of a proton torpedo arming itself. Leia looked back and forth at us, and her cheeks actually colored a little. She probably mistook the eye contact and quiet words for something else entirely.

"I should probably let you two catch up on things..."

Don't leave me alone, I mentally pleaded. _Don't leave me alone with Wedge and that I-have-a-target-lock-on-you glint in his eye._ For a moment Leia hesitated, reconsidering.

"Thank you, Princess," Wedge smiled. Grateful. Sweet. Gentlemanly. Leia fell for it. Or maybe it was just what she wanted to believe. Ever since Wedge and I hooked up, Leia had been happy for us...maybe too happy. Maybe relieved.

"I'll see you at breakfast," she promised, giving me a quick squeeze and a peck on the cheek. Then she turned around and embraced Wedge; he returned her hug one-armed, but warmly, like a brother. On a superficial level, they could have been brother and sister--they were both small and light-boned, with dark brown hair and clear brown eyes. But that was only superficial, a trick of genetics that put them in the same category as every other small, dark human in the galaxy. I found it more interesting how they came from such different backgrounds--Alderaanian royalty and Corellian working-class--and yet had a similar way about them, the air of purpose that comes with absolute devotion to duty. Maybe that was one of the reasons I found them both attractive. I'd been floundering for a long time, trying to figure out my place in the galaxy and the Rebellion and life in general; Leia and Wedge, even though they were about the same age as me, exuded a sense of I know exactly what I'm doing.

With one last encouraging smile for me, followed by a wink, Leia left the room in a swirl of white skirts. Wedge remained in composure as he watched her go, but as soon as the door slid shut, he rounded on me, pointing his finger like a weapon.

"You," he said, "have some explaining to do."

Might as well have it out now.

"It was just a hug," I said.

"What?"

"A hug. You know. That putting-your-arms-around-a-friend thing." I could've used one of those from him, actually, but I wasn't about to tell him so.

He blinked and shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

Uhhhhh...oh boy. The back of my neck suddenly felt hot. "What are you talking about?"

He tossed his helmet aside. This was an improvement. If he didn't have it in his hands, he couldn't hurl it at me.

"Escape from Hoth. Rendezvous. Kri'taar." He folded his arms over his chest. "Sound familiar?"

Oh. He wasn't upset about Leia, he was angry about my not making the rendezvous. Three fighter squadrons, a transport, and a medical runner were to meet piecemeal at the fourth and outermost planet of the Kri'taar system. Regrouping there, we were to continue together

on a series of jumps that would bring us to the rest of the Fleet.

"Sorry about the rendezvous," I said, feeling sheepish now. "Small change of plans."

His jaw went slack. "Did I hear that right? A small change of plans?"

In retrospect, it did sound kind of stupid. When I didn't answer, his face hardened and I saw the anger come back again.

"Luke, this is war," he said. "You had orders."

"I countermanded those orders."

"For yourself! Because it suited your needs, not because the situation warranted. When Blackie told me Artoo said you went joyriding, I didn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it, I had to hear it from you--and now that I have, I still don't want to believe it." He ripped his gloves off and slapped them down next to his helmet. "We thought you were dead. When you didn't get back to the Fleet, we all thought you were dead."

He wouldn't look at me, but I sensed a knot of something black and dismal at the core of his anger. He's been mourning, I realized. That cut me more than the anger, cut right through my own morass of self-pity. Twice orphaned--once by the loss of his parents, and then again when he joined the Rebellion and became persona non grata on his Imperial-friendly homeworld--Wedge had found a home among the other outcasts who made up the Alliance, and a family in Rogue Squadron. In me, he'd found a friend and eventually a lover.

He thought he'd lost me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You have every right to be angry."

The dull red of his anger spiked through with yellow surprise again, and he looked at me dumbfounded. "Are you reading me the Statement of Lovers' Rights?"

"I'm just saying--"

"Don't," he said, cutting the air with his hands. "Don't go there. Just don't."

"I screwed up--"

"No, this was not a screw up. This was not a mistake. You had your orders, and you deliberately disobeyed them. Didn't you ever think that maybe you were letting us down?"

Actually, no. It never occurred to me that I should feel guilty about going to Dagobah. I never rehearsed explanations. Once the decision was made, I didn't question it. Why should I? The rout at Hoth cemented something that had been coming together ever since Ben appeared to me in the snow. It all clicked into place: we needed a Jedi. The best way to help the Rebellion, and help my friends, was to become a Jedi. Nothing to apologize for there. And nobody else--not Leia, not General Rieekan, not even anyone else in Rogue

Squadron--had confronted me about my absence.

"Look, I never meant to hurt anyone, least of all you, but--"

"You think this is about my feelings?" he said incredulously.
"Commander, you went AWOL. You're lucky you're not facing a court-martial."

"Do you really want to get official, Captain?" I said it lightly, trying to make a joke of it.

He folded his arms and regarded me with an expression I'd never seen before. Not from him, anyway. It was the sort of look drill sergeants give troublesome recruits. It was the sort of look you'd give a vile specimen of fungus.

"Speaking as an officer--not your friend, not your lover, not your wingman, but as an officer of the Rebel Alliance--if I had any say in the matter, you would be court-martialed."

"Wedge, I understand you feel betrayed--"

"This is not about feelings," he said. "It's about how you disappeared and left us in the lurch. It's not something you did to me, it's something you did to all of us. You did this to the Alliance."

I squirmed inwardly. Strictly speaking, running off to Dagobah constituted desertion. But...."There was a damn good reason why I did what I did, if you'd hear me out--"

"Save it for the families of the pilots we lost at Kri'taar. I've already sent the notifications myself, but I'm sure those people would love to know Luke Skywalker had a damn good reason for not being there to help us fight our way out."

Kri'taar? Something froze in the core of my spine. "What happened?"

He frowned. "You didn't hear?"

"I just got out of the bacta tank this morning, and Too-Onebee was working on me all day." I held up my new hand.

I felt the heat of his anger slip a notch as he looked away, clearly embarrassed. Embarrassed for himself, for me, or because of me--I couldn't tell which. "I guess you didn't hear." He took a deep breath. "There was an ambush. I don't know if the Imps were smart or lucky."

My knees buckled. Alliance ships coming out of hyperspace in twos and threes, fleeing Hoth in disarray, would be mere toys under the guns of a waiting Imperial ship. A Star Destroyer. I don't know how I knew it was a Star Destroyer, but the knowledge was suddenly there, as certain as if Wedge had just told me. I could almost see the Imp captain. Creases in his uniform sharp enough to draw blood. Hair graying precisely at the temples, as if were afraid to spread out to the rest of his head. Small, close-set eyes, like a ranat. Cunning.

I heard someone say, "Smart. The Imps were smart," and it took me a moment to realize that I was the one who'd spoken. I shook my head and blinked, coming back to the here and now.

Wedge was staring at me like he thought I might have brain damage.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking me over very carefully.

"Yeah, it's...I'll tell you later. Tell me what happened with Kri'taar."

He laughed once--dry and humorless, more of a cough than a laugh. "What happened with Kri'taar," he murmured, raking a trembling hand through his hair. "It was a mynock shoot, that's what happened with Kri'taar." Now his voice was trembling as well, and he sat down on the side of my bed.

"Janson and I came out of hyperspace at about the same time--the first thing we saw was the transport, coming apart before our eyes. Then we saw the Destroyer. And the TIEs. And what was left of our fighters." He paused, his eyes glazing over with the unfocused look of a man reliving horror. I was sitting next to him before I realized it, putting my arm around his shoulders and pulling him close so that our heads touched. He didn't turn his face to mine, but he didn't pull away either, and after a long moment he continued.

"The medrunner still had a chance to get away--we fought the eyeballs off that ship, and it jumped to hyperspace--and then the transport blew. Took out a bunch of fighters, mostly ours, the ones trying to protect the transport's escape pods. And then the Imps--they went after the pods that did get away. Picked them off like it was target practice, like it was a game. We tried to fight, but there were so many Imps--we had to run."

"Who got away?"

"Janson. Tycho. Me. Hobbie, but he was in the medrunner."

I nodded. Good pilots, good friends. At least they'd made it. "And who else?"

He shook his head.

Holy...

"All of them?" I whispered.

"All."

"Commander Treme?" I pressed.

"Dead."

"Captain D'mar?"

"Dead."

"What about--"

"What part of all don't you understand?" he exploded. He twisted out of my embrace and shot up as if propelled. By the next breath, he was halfway across the room and pacing.

"It was a massacre," he said. "It was worse than Hoth. The comm was alive, everybody was yelling at the same time, there was no discipline. No one to lead, no one willing to follow, it was every man for himself. There was wreckage, pilots gone EV, bodies, pieces of bodies, I flew through what seemed like a tiny hailstorm except it wasn't hail, it was blood. A hundred and nineteen sentients were on that transport, and the ones who didn't die in the explosion were shot down in their escape pods. I can't even figure out if that's a good thing--better they die quickly than be captured and tortured, but if only they got away, there could have been some hope--Kri'taar has sympathizers...." He trailed off, reaching down into his reserves of energy and finding nothing, not even anger to fuel him now. He slouched against the transparisteel viewport, the one Leia and I had been gazing out of just a short time ago.

I looked at him, really looked at him, and saw the exhaustion and despair in every line of his body. The way that sheaf of hair fell over his forehead, the way his grim little mouth turned down at the corners, the way his spine bent and the way he sagged against the viewport, as if standing under his own power was impossible. Here is the Rebel Alliance, I realized. Beaten down by too many losses, betrayed by a friend. If Wedge had reached this point, we were all in trouble.

Yoda's words--"If you leave now, help them you could, but you would destroy all for which they have fought and suffered"--came back to me, and this time they took on a second, subtler meaning I had never considered before. And Wedge was right...I hadn't done it just to him, I'd done it to three squadrons and a hundred and nineteen fellow Rebels. At the very least.

"If the situation was that far gone, one more pilot wouldn't have made a difference," I said into the silence, just to say something. It was meant merely as an observation, but as I said the words I realized they sounded like an excuse.

"Maybe, maybe not," Wedge admitted, raking his hair back again, only to have it fall in his eyes again. "But if that one pilot was the hero of Yavin..."

I knew where he was going with this, and I cut him off fast. "What happened at Yavin was a group effort. I fired the lucky shot, but only after two squadrons got chewed up. Every pilot there was a hero. Including you," I added, daring him to disagree.

He looked at me thoughtfully, head inclined, as if he were studying a puzzle. "Answer me this," he said at last. "If I had skipped off on my own, ignoring orders to rendezvous at Kri'taar, what would a military court call that?"

"Desertion," I admitted uneasily, wondering if I was flying into the path of a proton torpedo.

"Be more specific. We were in strategic retreat from battle."

"Desertion under fire."

"And technically, what is the penalty for that?"

"Death." I could see the torp coming, but there was no evading it now.

"And would I be executed?"

"Wedge...you're a valuable pilot..." One last pitiful attempt to escape.

"Would I be executed?"

"Yes."

"So why aren't you dead?"

Boom. I sat there, staring at my hands. (My hand. One hand, one construct.) Wedge continued relentlessly, even though I would not look at him.

"Anybody else, anybody else in this army, including myself, would be court-martialed and shot. But they're not going to kill the hero of Yavin. To do that would be to kill the one great victory of the Rebel Alliance. I'm not saying this to hurt you, Luke, but it has to be said. This is a strange army, and you're a special case in a whole army of special cases. If there was anyone who could've rallied us at Kri'taar, brought some order into the fight and saved a few more lives...it's you. Because pilots trust you as the man who can do the impossible. You killed the Death Star. You are the hero of Yavin. I'm just the guy who bugged out of the trench at the last minute."

It was an old wound, one that kept oozing because he kept picking at it. I looked up to deny, to scold, to shut him up...but I met his desolate eyes, and saw his jaw tight with injured pride, and I understood. Wedge wasn't the only one prodding and picking it bloody. There were others keeping it open as well, others who whispered coward behind his back, no matter how many battles he fought, no matter how many times he proved his courage.

There were probably those, I realized, who interpreted his retreat from Kri'taar as further evidence of cowardice. No one in high command, of course. They wouldn't have promoted him otherwise. No, it was coming from the ranks. From fellow pilots, possibly some of them under his command now.

And you don't respect, or trust, a coward in command.

"Get well soon," he said. It was almost a plea. "We need you."

"You mean you don't want my head on a pike?" I laughed bitterly.

"I've said my piece." He pushed away from the viewport slowly, as if the ship's gravity was too much for him. "It's done. You're still here. We need a leader. We need you." He picked up his helmet and gloves and shuffled towards the door.

"What about you?" I called to his retreating back. "What do you

need?"

He didn't stop, and he didn't answer.

End
file.